

Review of an External Speaker invitation

Context

The Public Speaking Society (PSS), a University of Exeter Student Guild Society, invited Mr Dan Peña to speak at the University. According to his LinkedIn page Mr Peña is:

“an extremely dynamic and powerful speaker, motivator, and grand master entrepreneur. His Quantum Leap Advantage™ high performance, business success seminars have been in demand in the United States, Canada and Europe. His seminars and talks have been sponsored by various US and foreign universities, including Oxford University, University of Pennsylvania, and the US Naval Academy. All his talks in different educational institutions can be found FREE on his website: <https://www.danpena.co.uk/>

The PSS submitted the appropriate documentation and risk assessment for the event and on 15th November 2021 understood that the Student Guild gave permission for the event to go ahead in early 2022. The PSS and Mr Peña proceeded to make arrangements for the talk, including advertising on Mr Peña's website and social media (he has 360k subscribers on Youtube, 314k on Instagram, and the advert for his talk is the pinned tweet on @danspean where there are 42.3k followers).

On 18th January 2022, the University and the Guild held a Speaker and Event Panel to consider the risk assessment provided by the Public Speaking Society for the proposed talk by Mr Dan Peña, due to take place on 1 March 2022.

The Panel was called following concerns regarding the content of Mr Peña's previous talks and resultant concerns about the safety and well-being of vulnerable students. The Speaker and Events panel decided not to allow the event to proceed on the grounds of health and safety, noting the following points:

- (a) While the Panel was mindful of the proposed mitigations, particularly with regard to the chairing of the event and pre-event discussions with the speaker on the content of the talk, it was clear to the Panel that the speaker had previously demonstrated that he was not receptive to moderation and had behaved aggressively when this was attempted. The Panel was therefore not convinced that it would be possible to mitigate the risks posed to the student community and in particular to ensure there would be no statements made that could pose a significant risk to vulnerable individuals. Concerns were particularly noted regarding previous statements encouraging those who “do not succeed” to commit suicide, abuse of individuals with protected characteristics as defined by the Equality Act 2010, and the aggressive mocking of those with mental health challenges.
- (b) The Panel felt the risk was not limited to attendance at the event, as once exposed to the speaker, any attendee could subsequently access Mr Peña's material online, which contains very explicit messages encouraging suicide.
- (c) The Panel felt that the availability of wellbeing support, defined as a key mitigation, was reliant on help being sought. There was a strong concern that individuals negatively impacted by Mr Peña's rhetoric might not be able to seek support when in a vulnerable mental state.

[REDACTED]

[REDACTED]

[REDACTED]

[REDACTED]

Findings

Having reviewed all of the information provided I wrote to the President of the PSS and requested sight of

"all relevant documentation from Mr Peña's team relating to the title, purpose, outline content, and nature of his proposed talk. This should include the expectations from Mr Peña's team with regards to procedural matters such as the agenda and timings for the event, how it will be chaired, if there will be Q&A, etc. I also expect to see documentation with regards to Mr Peña's expectations for any filming of the event and IP for those recordings, details of any reserved seating for his team and any guests, etc. This should also include confirmation from Mr Peña that he has acknowledged the University of Exeter's Speakers and events policy.

In addition I would be grateful if you could provide me with the proposed information which you will share with registered attendees in advance of the talk. This should cover procedural matters such as any filming, as well as 'content warning', as it were, with regards to the potentially frequent use of extreme obscenities and any references or characterisations that could be considered offensive, especially to those with protected characteristics under the Equality Act 2010. I would like to know how you will make attendees aware of public-domain records of previous University talks given by Mr Peña, as well as other public-domain information about Mr Peña which documents concerns with regards to his views on mental health and suicide".

[REDACTED] telephone call with the President and Treasurer which took place on 18th February.

The President and Treasurer sent me various e-mail correspondence with Mr Peña's team and a draft content advisory notice. The e-mail correspondence with the speaker's team confirmed that they had acknowledge the University Speakers policy, and that the only attendees would be the speaker and his wife. The PSS themselves would be filming the event – with the filming being only of the speaker and an audio recording – and providing the recording to Mr Peña's team.

In discussion with the President and Treasurer I asked that they gain written assurance from Mr Peña's team that he should aim to avoid repeated use of extreme obscenities. [REDACTED]

[REDACTED]

[REDACTED]

[REDACTED]

[REDACTED]

Recommendations

Mr Peña is on record for saying that he can be civilised and adjust his vocabulary and references, and I have asked the PSS to secure that confirmation in writing from his team on this occasion.

I requested that a Content Advisory notice should be issued to all those attending the meeting and received the following from the PSS who noted that all attendees are over the age of 18 and are actively signing up to the talk, several of whom are travelling some distance to attend:

Dear attendee,

As you are aware, the 'Dan Peña - 'Trillion Dollar Man' Special Guest Speaker Event' which you have signed up for is taking place on the 1st of March, from 5:30pm in the Forum Auditorium.

As you should also be aware, Dan Peña often uses offensive language, which many for some, may be unpleasant and/or lead to some people being 'triggered'.

Please watch the following videos below to see what the tone of the talk will look like & what language he uses.

<https://youtu.be/1psLqTuUjzc> - talk at the University of Greenwich

<https://youtu.be/XGLyJSqErew> - talk at Oxford University

If you are not comfortable with this language and/or tone, PLEASE DO NOT COME TO THIS TALK

The PSS are clear that they see this as a keynote event in their calendar, providing what their society members are looking for with regards to a high-profile external speaker

I asked the PSS specifically about the seminar footage of Mr Peña which would clearly have serious health and safety issues with regards to mental health and suicide. The PSS President and Treasurer noted that their Welfare Officer had brought up that issue and that they would clearly state that this would not be acceptable in his talk at the University of Exeter and I requested that this assurance should be sought in writing from Mr Peña's team.

Recommendation

Having reviewed the available information and had the Content Advisory notice provided, I am satisfied that the event can proceed as planned on 1st March 2022 in the Alumni Auditorium with the following conditions.

1. That the Content Advisory note is reviewed and approved by the Student Guild.
2. That the wellbeing support as outlined in the risk assessment is provided.
3. That Mr Peña's team provide the assurances regarding restraint on the excessive use of extreme obscenities and avoidance of references to mental health and suicide.
4. At least one of the Senior Leadership Team of the Student Guild and at least one member of the Professional Services Leadership Team are in attendance at the event to support the PSS if needed with regards to the tone and content of the talk.
5. That the recording of the event is edited to ensure no personal information is included (e.g. when an audience member identifies themselves) and that a copy of the recording is made available to the University following the event.

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20th February 2022.